The Missing Cropsey Couple in 1923

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For: FairburyNews.net
Date: September 7, 2025

One of the most scandalous stories in the history of Cropsey was the disappearance of a married woman and a divorced World War I veteran back in 1923. The married woman was Sybil Knight, a country school teacher from Colfax, who was married to Belle Prairie farmer Lon Tarr. The divorced World War I veteran was Cloyd Button.

The family story of Lon Tarr began with his grandfather, Aaron Becker. Before the Civil War, Aaron Becker was a prominent farmer in Belle Prairie Township south of Fairbury. When the Civil War started, it was an acceptable practice to pay a substitute to take your place as a soldier in the Union Army. In the 1888 Livingston County history book, it was noted that Aaron Becker, of Belle Prairie Township, paid $1,000 in 1863 to a substitute for taking his place in the Union Army. That amount would be equivalent to $25,924 in today's dollars. The replacement did not receive their fee until their stint of military service had been completed.

One of the daughters of Aaron Becker was Sarah Ann Becker (1864-1955). Sarah married William A. Tarr, and they farmed in Belle Prairie Township. William and Sarah Tarr had three children. Daughter Estella Mae Tarr was born in 1886. Son Delford A. Tarr was born in 1887. Their other son, Leone, "Lon" Tarr, was born in 1896.

The family story of the married school teacher who ran away with the divorced man began with the birth of Sybil Beatrice Knight in 1896 in Colfax. She graduated with the Class of 1914 in Colfax. Sybil married Lon Tarr in 1917 in Champaign when she was 21 years old. Lon Tarr farmed in Belle Prairie Township, and Sybil taught country school at Potosi. The Potosi country school was located between Fairbury and Cropsey.

In 1923, Sybil had been married for six years, and she was 27 years of age. Lon and Sybil Tarr had no children. In April of 1923, Lon drove his wife, Sybil, to Bloomington and left her at the County School Superintendent's office. When he went back to pick her up, she could not be found. Lon checked several places in Bloomington, but could not find her. Lon finally drove home to their farm in Belle Prairie Township without her.

That same day, Cloyd B. Button and his automobile went missing from Cropsey. Cloyd was drafted into WWI. Just before Cloyd was sent overseas, he married a girl in New York. After the war was over, Cloyd's wife returned to her native home in New York, and divorce proceedings had been started.

On April 20, 1923, the Blade published a story titled "Cropsey People Disappear." The article recounted that local opinion was that Mrs. Tarr and Cloyd Button had left together. Sybil had made no mention to her students that she might be leaving. A substitute teacher, Clarence Blundy, was found to take the place of the missing Mrs. Tarr at the

Potosi school.

Fourteen days after the Cropsey couple went missing, they were found together near Flint, Michigan. Mrs. Tarr was returned to her parents in Colfax. Cloyd Button was arrested and charged with violating the Mann Act. The judge ordered a bond of $1,000 for Mr. Button. Cloyd asked his Cropsey friends to pay the bond, but they refused. Since Cloyd had no money, he was detained in the McLean County Jail. The bond of $1,000 in 1923 would be equivalent to $18,760 in today's dollars.

The Mann Act was named after the Congressman who sponsored the bill, James Robert Mann of Illinois. In its original form, the law made it a felony to engage in interstate or foreign commerce transport of "any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose." Its primary stated intent was to address prostitution, immorality, and human trafficking, particularly where trafficking was for the purposes of prostitution.

The Mann Act was one of several acts of protective legislation aimed at moral reform during the Progressive Era. In practice, its ambiguous language about "immorality" resulted in it being used to criminalize even consensual sexual behavior between adults. It was amended by Congress in 1978 and again in 1986 to limit its application to transport for the purpose of prostitution or other illegal sexual acts.

Cloyd Button, the World War I veteran, was eventually transferred from the McLean County Jail to the Sangamon County Jail in Springfield. A grand jury in Springfield reviewed the charge against Mr. Button of violating the Mann Act. The grand jury voted not to indict Cloyd for violating the Mann Act. Mr. Button was released from jail on June 8, 1923. No record could be found regarding Mr. Button's activities after he was released from the county jail.

Lon Tarr and Sybil Knight got a divorce. She moved to the Indianapolis, Indiana, area and took a job as a stenographer. Sybil then got a job as the private secretary to the matron of the women's state prison in Indianapolis. Her co-workers reported that Sybil was an accurate, neat, and dependable worker.

In late November of 1926, three years after she went missing, Sybil underwent an operation for appendicitis at St. Vincent's Hospital. She was unable to recover from this operation and died in the hospital. Sybil was only 30 years old when she died. The funeral was held in Colfax, and she was buried in a local cemetery.

Lon Tarr learned the embalmer trade. Mr. Tarr was a funeral director and embalmer with the Flynn Funeral Home in Bloomington and the Oxmann Funeral Home in Hammond, Indiana. In 1941, at the age of 46, Lon Tarr married Lorine Snodsmith. Lon and Lorine had no children. Lon Tarr died in 1961 at the age of 65.

The specific details of the relationship between Cloyd Button and Mrs. Tarr will likely never be known. The parents of Sybil Knight, or her husband, could have insisted that

authorities charge Cloyd with violating the Mann Act. It is unlikely that there was any evidence that Cloyd forced Mrs. Tarr to go with him, given the grand jury's refusal to indict him for violating the Mann Act. There is no evidence that Cloyd Button joined Sybil Knight after she moved to Indiana. Unfortunately, we may never know what became of Cloyd Button after he was released from the Sangamon County Jail.

CAPTURE CROPSEY COUPLE

Cloyd Button and Mrs. Leon Tarr, who disappeared from the vicinity of Cropsey about three weeks ago, were arrested in a town near Flint, Michigan, last Friday, and Button now reposes in the McLean County jail at Bloomington, while Mrs. Tarr is with her parents at Colfax.

When arrested Button was without funds. He tried to get Cropsey parties to go his bond of a thousand dollars, but up to the present time he has been unsuccessful.

—Fairbury Blade